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SUBJECT: ETHNIC RUSSIAN ESTONIANS - TRENDS IN POLITICAL
PARTICIPATION

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. In contrast to neighboring Latvia, Estonia's Russian-speaking minority exercises political will through mainstream, rather than ethnically-based, political parties. Russian-centric parties are headed by fringe elements and have not generated anywhere near enough popular support to gain any seats in the last two parliamentary elections. With the exception of the Bronze Soldier, hot-button ethnic topics including school reform and citizenship were largely non-issues in the recent elections. The populist Center Party remains a strong favorite among Russian-speakers. However, as social and political integration continues, the party may lose its tight hold on the ethnic Russian vote. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Although almost one-third of Estonia's population is Russian-speaking, Russian-centric parties generate very little popular support. Russian-centric Party leaders in Estonia tend to be fanatical and base their platforms solely on polarizing issues like the Bronze Soldier. These parties are meant to appeal to all Russian speaking minorities - in additions to Russians (who are about 26% of the population), there are also ethnic Ukrainians (2%), Byelorussians (1%) and small numbers of people from other parts of the former Soviet Union. In the March 4 parliamentary elections, neither of Estonia's two Russian-centric parties, the Constitution Party and the Russian Party, managed to come anywhere close to crossing the 5% threshold needed to gain a seat in Parliament. Even in Tallinn's 2nd District, which includes the heavily ethnic-Russian borough of Lasnamae, the Constitution Party, which built its campaign largely on opposition to relocation of the Bronze Soldier monument (Refs A and B)-- an issue of significant importance to the ethnic Russian community -- earned only 2% of the vote. The Russian Party fared even worse. This is the second parliamentary election in a row where Russian-centric parties have failed to win any seats in parliament.

¶3. (SBU) Although the purely Russian-focused parties did poorly, the Center Party again fared exceptionally well in predominantly Russian-speaking areas. Center won a landslide victory in heavily Russian Ida-Viru county with 55% of the vote, up from 41% in 2003. In Lasnamae, the Center Party earned 39% of the vote, 18% more than the Reform Party, the next highest vote-getter in the district. Center has consistently been the only major political party to actively court ethnic Russian voters as a group since the mid 1990s. Since that time, Center has handled carefully hot button issues like language requirements, citizenship and, most recently, the Bronze soldier - cementing its support among Russian speakers. Leaders in the Russian-speaking community have gravitated toward the Center Party. A prime example is Mihhail Stalnuhhin, the

Chairman of the Narva City Council (in Ida Viru County) who garnered 5474 votes in the Parliamentary elections - the tenth highest vote total in the country. Faced with a choice between the fringe Russian-centric parties and Center, most Russian speaking voters feel that supporting the smaller, less-established parties is a waste of their vote.

¶4. (SBU) Center Party's hold on Russian-speaking voters remains very strong. However, some observers believe this is changing as integration of Estonia's minorities continues. Vladimir Velman, a Center Party MP since 1995, told us he believes there is little ethnic political tension in Estonia. Jevgenia Garanza, Deputy Editor of the Russian language weekly paper Den Za Dnjem, agreed, noting that unlike the situation in Latvia, which has more sensitive issues that unite Russians as a group, Russians in Estonia have less of a need to pull together. As a result, more and more of Estonia's politically active Russians cast their ballots based on more diverse, individual concerns. Also, in contrast to Latvia, Russian speaking (non-citizen) residents in Estonia can vote in local elections. This limited enfranchisement may also have helped to vest Russian speakers more broadly in the Estonian political system.

¶5. (SBU) Velman asserted that, despite Center's efforts, the party is destined to lose some of its ethnic Russian base over time, due to this diversification of voter priorities. For example, the Center Party's focus on the working class has already resulted in the loss of prosperous Russians to the Reform Party. Both Velman and Garanza predict that this diversification trend will continue among Russian speakers who naturalize (and thus gain the right to vote in national elections). They contend that these new citizens are likely to reject ethnically-based parties and platforms and turn instead towards mainstream Estonian issues, because as they integrate into Estonian society their priorities increasingly reflect those of all Estonians. (Note: Parliamentary election results anecdotally support this theory. Despite the fact that there were tens of thousands of newly naturalized Russian speakers eligible to vote this year, Center lost its position as the largest party in Parliament. End note.)

¶6. (SBU) Hot-button ethnic topics including school reform and citizenship were largely non-issues in the recent elections. The Bronze Soldier issue is one of the only issues that continues to unite Russians on a purely ethnic basis and to impact the political process. According to Velman, the Center Party's opposition to legislation designed to pave the way to remove the Bronze Soldier from downtown Tallinn (Refs A and B), probably helped increase Center's support among Russian voters. Conversely, the Reform Party may have lost some ethnic Russian support when it led efforts to pass legislation to relocate the monument. The Center Party actively campaigned on the idea that Russian members of Reform did not care about the interests of ethnic Russians. Two former (ethnic Russian) Reform Party MPs in Tallinn who abstained from voting on Bronze Soldier legislation, lost their seats in Parliament. One of these, Sergei Ivanov who received 1,138 votes in 2003, managed only 257 votes this time. (Note: Ivanov was also much lower on Reform's party list this year than in ¶2003. End Note.)

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